

Easter Fools

April 1, 2018

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev Paul Beckel

WELCOME

Good morning. No kidding. It's spitty outside but it's a good morning when we can see the miracle within the mirage. And it is a good morning when we can laugh, especially when we can laugh at ourselves.

Easter Sunday / April Fools — what a fortuitous juxtaposition. The sublime and the ridiculous set up to teach us about transformation.

I've been anticipating this confluence since before I was born. It's been like 60 or 70 years. Maybe you saw it coming 40 days ago on Ash Wednesday which, with the same statistical serendipity, fell this year on Valentine's Day. Why didn't I think to have a service that night in which we all came up here to get little red heart stickers placed on our foreheads?

When I was growing up in the Catholic Church, Ash Wednesday was holy day of obligation and everyone knew that you had skipped mass if you weren't wearing that smudge of ash on your forehead. The priest dipped his thumb in ash and made the sign of the cross on our foreheads, saying, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Well, except the priests who had just been fingerprinted that morning — they didn't really need the ash.

So now we'll have to wait another 60 or 70 years, but it's going to be so great: we'll put the little heart stickers on each other and say: "Remember that you are love and to love you shall return."

Which reminds me, of course, that *Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.*

And in honor of a great love: in honor of Martin Luther King Jr, assassinated 50 years ago this week, we light this chalice.

GATHERING SONG

#1000 *Morning has Come*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Henry's Awful Mistake, by Robert Quackenbush

Summary: Henry the duck wants to have a special dinner for his friend Clara. When he sees an ant in the kitchen, he first chases it with a frying pan. When it crawls into a crack in the wall, he goes after it with a hammer...eventually destroying the wall, knocking out a pipe, flooding the house, and ruining the dinner... in fact, the whole house got washed away in the flood. But Henry had a chance to start again. When he built a new house and again invited Clara to dinner, he saw another ant. And he looked the other way.

ERACISM MINUTE

SPOKEN MEDITATION

The Christian mystic, St. Theresa of Avila said, "*The greatest barrier to our experience of God is our last experience of God.*"

Today let's remove some barriers. Whether you have a favorable or unfavorable image of God, I invite you now to crush your image. Cast it to the wind. Or burn it.

God is in no danger. These images or concepts or labels, these memories or expectations... are not god. Burn them, bury them, let them go.

Time and again, life rises out of the rubble.

If you think of god as a useless metaphor, cast that image out. If you know god as a loving parent, crush that knowledge like an empty shell. If you see god in the wind, the waves, and the pines, let that image burn.

Time and time again, life rises from the ashes.

Cast out your hopes, your fears, your doubts, certainties, and bliss... leave only an empty space.

Into that space will come something new.

Let it be.

CHALICE CHOIR *Set me as a Seal*, by Robert Nance

MESSAGE

Set me as a seal upon thy heart, for love is as strong as death. Waters cannot quench its fire; floods cannot sweep it away.

This is a line from the *Song of Solomon* — a request from one lover to another: be mine; make me yours. This song, written as a dialogue between two young lovers probably made it into the Bible as an allegory for the love between God and humanity — a love stronger than death. I mean, there has to be some deeper meaning for this (somewhat raunchy) lyric to have been included along with the part, four lines earlier, which goes: *I would have you drink spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate.*

C'mon people. We're reading the Bible. Let's get serious. Even Donald Trump shared a message of Christian goodwill this weekend, so it's obviously time to be genuine. If you came here today thinking, "Oh, it's April Fool's day, Paul will probably be yuckin' it up," well think again. This is a grave sermon. Even if I did say something funny it would probably pass-over your heads.

Ok, ok, if you must... let's just get all of that pent up energy *out* right now. Let's make this like a

coming out day. Let's bring it out as laughter: the uncertainty, the cynicism, the rage, even the loneliness and the self-deception. Let out the joy and fun and imagination. Mindfully raucous laughter unconcerned with what people think, unconcerned that it's going to get Aunt Mable's undies in a jumble. Let's create laughter like an earthquake that will knock every tombstone off its foundation.

Let's all turn toward the center aisle so we can look one another in the eye as we let it out. Say he he he hah hah hah. Forget what I said a minute ago about being genuine, fake it if you have to prime the pump. Open your eyes real big and make crazy faces. Laugh like an old person. Laugh like a young person. Laugh like you got a stick up your butt. Laugh like Cookie Monster. Laugh like you just pulled a prank on someone who you despise!

OK, let's settle down.

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Humor is about tension and release. Holding on then letting go. Moving from a proud "I know what's going on..." to that stressful in-between of "I don't really know what's going on..." and then bursting through to the understanding that *nobody knows what's going on, and that's ok!*

You know what else is ok? It's ok that Mary wasn't a virgin. I know this and you know this if you've studied birth order. Because Jesus must have been a third child, or a youngest. He wasn't a first child, serious and dutiful. He wasn't a middle child trying to smooth things over and make everyone happy. I mean, you may have heard him called the Prince of Peace, but have you read the gospels? How about the verse, and I'm not making this up, where he says, "*I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.*" That's not a middle child.

No Jesus was a third child. A cut up. The family jester. It's so weird that our Puritan attitudes have stuck with us so tenaciously. Or since the Puritans aren't around anymore maybe we could blame the Lutherans for American religion's obligatory solemnity. Or the Unitarians, of course, direct descendants of the Puritans, and still following in their priggish footsteps, at least some of the time, with our dour academic one-step-removed-from-religion religion... or with our completely humorless political correctness.

Why are we stuck on this image of Jesus as either solemn or saintly? (And I mean "saintly" in the worst possible way.) Or Jesus as indignant, or triumphant. How about Jesus the trickster? Like the mythic tricksters Coyote or Raven, or Anansi the spider character in West African and Caribbean folktales? Pan, Loki, or Br'er Rabbit, Hodja (the Sufi wise fool), or Bart Simpson...?

Did the Puritans not know that Jesus was a Jew?

"What? Ya gonna criticize your brother because he's got a splinter in his eye? You didn't notice you've got a whole frickin' log in your own? Oh, and you're going to stone this woman, because she's a sinner? Right, the guy who hasn't sinned, he gets to start. No ma, not you."

“You’re asking me about paying taxes to Caesar? The coin’s got his face on it, I guess it’s his right? Why should I care?”

“You got a bright candle? Good. Whatayagonna do stick it under a bushel basket? You schmuck!”

“Oh and did you hear about the rich man who had so much grain — it wouldn’t fit in his silos so he tears them down to build bigger ones, but then boom! God takes him out the next day. Did he think about that?”

Now you might interpret all of this as schadenfreude. That’s the pleasure you get from seeing people who you don’t like in distress. The pleasure *you* get, not me. I’m not like that. And no, I don’t think Jesus was like that either.

So then was he a nag? “Don’t do this, don’t do that... after all I’ve done for you?” I don’t think so. I mean maybe *you’re* a nag so it’s convenient to take on his voice and say “Hey, these aren’t my rules, these are God’s rules don’t make me the bad guy.”

I don’t think Jesus was into schadenfreude. He wasn’t a sadist. Satire / sadism, not the same things. Look at all the good things he did for people: healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the poor, the magic show with the water and the wine. Every one of those things of practical consequence. One exception, tho, and that was a doozy: walking on the water. Totally unnecessary, stormy night sneaks up on his friends out in a boat “Bwaaah!” Just because he could. And people try to make him into some kind of sourpuss.

Of course all of these stories were written decades after he died, so we don’t know if the evangelists spiced up Jesus’ personality or took it down a few notches so that the “Lamb of God” character could more readily support a totalitarian regime.

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I had the good fortune of completing my bachelor’s degree in philosophy at the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium, founded in 1425. Right across from campus was a popular student pub-café called The Erasmus, named for a Renaissance scholar, priest, and critic of the hypocrisy and corruption of the Church of his time. Nine years before Luther’s big date with destiny, Desiderius Erasmus wrote a book called *In Praise of Folly*, in which he lambasted the church for its hypocrisy and superstition. The form of the book was as interesting as the subject. The text is narrated by Folly herself, and is an expansive hymn of praise to herself. Nursed by the goddess Ignorance and accompanied by a bevy of friends named Flattery, Forgetfulness, Laziness, and Self-love, it set a standard for literary social criticism.

But what I really loved about The Erasmus was that it had cheap spaghetti and 106 kinds of beer. I don’t really like beer that much, but I found it fascinating that each of them had its own unique beer glass. They were all over the walls. I just drank the cheap stuff made there in town, Stella Artois, which, when it came to the U.S. a few years ago made me laugh as it seemed to be

marketed as something special. Hah!

But back to *In Praise of Folly*. Erasmus remained within the Church. But his book had influence well beyond. It influenced the teaching of rhetoric and adoxography, which is a fancy way of saying elegant or refined writing that addresses a trivial or base subject. Like we know from *The Onion* five centuries later.

Erasmus's work in many ways was like that of the jester, the wise fool, the Shakespearian fool, the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures... who got away with provocative and even aggressive speech, criticizing the powerful or flouting nonsensical social conventions, holding up a mirror to society. And for those of us paying attention, holding up a mirror to ourselves. Why did they get away with it? To some extent because, by their vulnerability, they came across as less threatening.

In this they have given us today a great gift, carried on through the great ironists Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, and Kurt Vonnegut. Unfortunately, and who knows maybe this was always the case, but nowadays satire is so prevalent (and maybe so necessary because it's all we have left when reason and evidence don't matter...) so nowadays it's hard to distinguish satire from bitter cynicism. We're no longer in the gentle age of Robert Frost's sigh: "Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee. And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me."

No now it's online instantaneous self-publishing where brilliant satire is tangled up with deliberate deceit, pure stupidity, and tweets concerning deadly serious matters of public policy that cannot be — cannot be — taken seriously because if they are malicious, or prove to be unpopular, the author can simply say, "Oh I was just kidding."

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But now I've gotten to the point of *explaining* humor, which is a sure way to ruin it. As depicted in the cartoon outside my office which shows God and an angel standing on a cloud. God is a little exasperated, he says: "But if I have to explain the meaning of life then it's not funny anymore."

But I digress, this sermon is supposed to be about Jesus, not God. Oh did I say that?

Yes I did because here I am in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Part of the living tradition of christian humanism of which Erasmus was an early example. Characterized by critical thinking (sometimes a little too much but) thereby appreciating the life and death of Jesus, a unique but not divine representative of the best in humanity: someone with heart and hands-on love, and a sense of humor as well.

A straight man, maybe, but in the grand comic tradition of Jewish self-deprecating humor — as exemplified by the rabbi, who once asked his old friend, a priest, "Could you ever be promoted within your Church?" The priest says, thoughtfully, "Well, I could become a bishop."

The rabbi persists, "And after that?" Well, the priest pauses, "Maybe I could be a cardinal, even."

"And then?" After thinking for some time, the priest responds, "Someday I may even rise to be the Pope."

But the rabbi is still not satisfied. "And *then*?" With an air of incredulity, the priest cries, "What more could I become? God Himself?"

The rabbi says quietly, "One of *our* boys made it."

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So what would Jesus do about Easter? Would he be offended by the non-sequitur of colored eggs delivered by bunnies? The triumphant organ music? The kumbaya and the fire-and-brimstone all professed in his name? Nobody knows, and that's just fine. It's a day of mystery, and starting over and the ultimate joke, the most unexpected happy ending to a brutal tragedy: that life goes on. That *love can survive death, and unity can survive birth, and truth can survive mirth.*

And you and I: you and I might come out of our sorrow and pain and re-enter a world relieved, and renewed.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

#1050 Jazz Alleluia

BENEDICTION

The word fool comes from the Latin root "follis" which means a bag of wind. A wind, perhaps, that cannot blow away the losses that have fallen upon us due to bad luck, betrayal, or our own mistakes over the years... a bag of wind, breath, spirit, that doesn't belong in a bag. Go today, and burst that bubble, let that wind blow where it will.

For now, let it blow this flame into the mystery, to re-emerge where you least expect it.

CIRCLE 'ROUND